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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers interested in overcoming student resistance or unwillingness to question authority should consider using "zines" in the classroom. According to one teen-ager, zines are "sorta like a magazine you publish yourself, but other people help you out." Concentrating on about any subject that interests its writers from music and television to every other sort of pop culture (one count puts the number at 10,000), zines are often controversial, subversive and shocking. Some sample titles would include, "Practical Anarchy," "Judy," "Drugs, Sex and, Rock-n-Roll," "X-PO," and "Brett News." Usually produced on home computers and xerox machines, they cost very little. Their most attractive feature, however, is that they interest students, even students who are for one reason or another not interested in school or in the kind of writing (research papers) that is usually expected of them. One student, for instance, who was being kicked out of a high school writing center for not meeting expectations with regard to his writing of research papers would spend hours at home working with his friends on zines. Three reasons why zines are a useful means of teaching writing are: (1) they provide a site for resistance and a way for students to contextualize literacy itself as a social and political construct; (2) students can discover a world of publishing possibilities through zines; and (3) zines provide a wide-open door through which students can enter the field of cultural studies. (TB)

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ED 373 352

Engaging Resistant Writers Through Zines In the Classroom
paper presented at 4C's 94 Convention (Nashville) by Judith Williamson Hudson

My first experience of the zine phenomenon had an appealingly distinct aura of postmodernity to it, and prompted me to think about student writers and their subject positions in writing classrooms. I plan to talk about zines and resistant students for whom resistance could mean several things. In last month's issue of *College English*, John Trimbur makes us aware of a "persistent confusion over the use of the term *resistance*" which could refer to a "student's reluctance or unwillingness, based on social position to question authority," or to a "central goal of radical pedagogy, namely eliciting counter-readings of the codes and practices of the dominant culture" (202). I propose that zines offer a lens through which student writers can examine and practice resistances. Although I'll offer evidence for the theoretical, cultural and political significance of zines, my focus here is primarily pedagogical. In order to ground my case for zines in the classroom, I'd like to depart from conventional academic discourse for a few minutes and share a personal anecdote.

When my sixteen year-old son announced that he was starting a zine, naturally I asked what a zine was. The first thing he told me was that a zine was something you worked on with other people, "sorta like a magazine you publish yourself, but other people help you out." He showed me a few self-published mini-magazines, and I encountered multiple layers of text and graphics, were often visually and verbally shocking. I also learned that zines can be about anything at all that interests its writers and readers. Although excited by encountering this relatively unstudied site of postmodern bricolage and participatory culture, I didn't immediately see the possibilities of the zine phenomenon. Before I got enthusiastic about zines, I needed to ask Daniel another question since he seemed committed to publishing one of these things in our own home. Setting aside my scholarly interests, I next asked a very pragmatic question: How much was all this help going to cost? "It doesn't cost

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anything," Daniel told me, offended that I would put a price tag on zinedom. "Everybody's just happy to help you out."

After zines entered our home, I observed several unique occurrences. A great deal of mail began arriving at our house addressed to Daniel with return addresses from all over the country. Also, my son and several other older teenagers, disinterested in school for a variety of reasons, began using my Macintosh computer to produce articles, interviews, letters and artwork. This seemed an uncharacteristic activity after a string of unpleasant and frustrating situations at school, particularly in what our school district was calling "Writing Center." The experience that led me to take zines seriously happened during October of Dan's junior year when he was removed from "Writing Center."

Writing centers are described by Irene L. Clark as a place where "one can learn to write by writing, talking about writing, getting feedback on one's writing, and by rewriting and rewriting, preferably in a comfortable non-threatening setting" (vii). Our high school English department chair explained that the writing center program "sets high standards," that Dan's work "wasn't up to par," that a student can be 'dismissed for not meeting expectations." This grated on me as antithetical to Clark's conception of a writing center. Since I'm studying the teaching of composition, I volunteered to work in the writing center, hoping that I might, at the least, be able to gently steer the teachers in the direction of some good reading about writing centers. The department chair told me he didn't know too much about writing centers, that he'd like to "brush up on them first." He told me that I should call him next spring.

When I hung up the phone after that conversation, I was stunned, but slightly more understanding about what my son and other "difficult" students faced. The writing center problem was the start of Dan being cycled through four English teachers during his junior year while his grades plummeted and he debated dropping out.

Meanwhile, through all this, he worked on his zine project for hours at a time. His friends came to the house and, as I watched them, I realized they were informally holding their own writer's workshop, serving as readers for each other and providing each other with the support and encouragement they weren't getting in their English classrooms. Through their zines, they were able to write about what was important to them which happened to be music, animal rights, vegetarianism, and anarchy among other topics. They tried out radical voices, thoughtful voices, humorous voices, constructing arguments to defend their points of view, their tasks simultaneously editorial, a: c and political. They wrote with an awareness of audience, taking stands on real issues, blending verbal and visual texts. I watched the zine writers use many other writerly behaviors including problem-solving techniques that could only have grown out of critical thought. They thought through the economics and the logistics of publication and the politics of publishing. The zine writers' enthusiasm and attention to detail with their work provided a sharp contrast to their boredom with school. I was impressed.

I was also depressed. I was depressed that his "writing center" teacher hadn't asked about student writing interests. This writing center was for The Research Paper and only The Research Paper. I was depressed that with all promise these young writers held, they were miserable in their English classes, put off by the sentences they had to diagram. As I observed the social practices of zine-writing, I kept wondering what would happen if students were encouraged to work on zine projects in their English classrooms. Zines seemed to offer one creative solution for getting students to engage in substantial writing projects. Zines would offer opportunities for writers to invest themselves in their writing, to discover the power of self-motivation.

Here's where things get "iffy": Zines, as I mentioned, are usually controversial and even shocking, covering the gamut of topics from music to television with every sort

of pop culture and political faction represented. Since I'm presenting a justification for zines in the classroom, let me pause for a moment and show you a few examples of zines that show what happens when sub-cultural groups meet with technology to produce their own publications [Show-and-tell-portion: "Practical Anarchy"; "Judy"; "Drugs, Sex and Rock-n-Roll"; "X-PO"; "Brett News"; "Blast"; "The Grumbling Yak"; "Sam Slam."]. As with most typical zines, these have a home-made look about them, and you can see how they rely on computers and copy machines. It's worth noting that you can find a number of rather slickly-produced zines are out there too. Prices vary. In "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," Constance Penley's article on *Star Trek* fandom, a listing from *Datazine* advertises Kirk/Spock zines ranging from $2.50 to $19.25 (481).

I can offer few definitive statements about zines, but I can make some rather broad generalizations: First, it's safe to say that most, not all, are low budget productions which would make them attractive as cooperative projects in the classroom. Second, zines frequently respond to popular culture, making them appealing to students who would find it easy to locate a topic of interest. Third, zines are often participatory in nature with blurred boundaries between readers and writers, offering sites for reader-writer connections. Fourth, most zines have a highly idiosyncratic nature and are too singular in theme to have a mass appeal, thus offering thousands of choices.

Exactly how many zines are out there? In the ground-breaking 1992 book, *The World of Zines* Gunderloy and Janice suggested that at least 10,000 zines were being published in the United States, saying however, because the boundaries of zines are so fluid that "by the broadest definition, every church bulletin and college litmag... would be a zine" (3). A year later, a *New York Times* article put the estimate closer to 20,000 and suggested that zines are the print equivalent of public access television. As with

the rest of publishing in the 90s, zines also have electronic counterparts on the Internet. Both print and electronic zines can be flexible and responsive to a variety of rhetorical situations. Whether they're Whitman of Shakespeare zines, radical lesbian zines, or fan-zines, what seems to matter most is the blurring of boundaries between graphics and text, the ease of self-publication and the heteroglossic quality of writers' voices. But they are not likely to become useful if they remain unknown, if their potential remains untapped, if they are left unobserved on the margins.

By conducting an informal survey of secondary English teachers and zine publishers, I learned the extent to which zines spark controversy and ignite issues of censorship. This research was qualitative and tentative, but helped me to make some observations. If teachers knew what zines were, most were not anxious to get them into their classroom..

Teachers voiced concern about "content" and "acceptance by parents." Some were concerned about zines fitting into the curriculum and suggested that perhaps zine-writing could be an "after-school club." One teacher, open to student choice in writing, asserted that if students worked on zines in her class, she would structure it as a writing-only assignment since she didn't think graphics were important in an English classroom. A student teacher, after a semester in the classroom, wrote about having little opportunity to do writing with seventh graders. Although these respondents were public school teachers, I would argue that their privileging of traditional literacy and canonicity is not an uncommon find in higher education. As with many members of college English departments, they didn't value visual texts nor texts outside the traditional canon.

Student respondents, however, including both high school and college students, said they liked to see "good graphics" in a zine. Some students also mentioned that zines were banned in their school. The difference in response rate between teachers

and students suggests some tension between student enthusiasm and teacher reluctance to bringing zines into the classroom. Of the thirty surveys I gave to teachers and the thirteen I gave to students, I noted a 16% response rate from teachers and a 70% student response rate. Further, the students' responses overflowed with comments usually written in a very readable, "talky" style.

I launched Zines-L, an electronic discussion list on the Internet to start a conversation about zines. One teacher I met on Zines-L said that she had used zines in her classroom several years earlier, but her administrators didn't approve of them. This particular teacher, also a involved in the participatory culture of fan-zines based on TV show "Beauty and the Beast," was aware of both the potential and the controversy of zines in the classroom. In order to avoid confrontations with administrators, she talked to her students about censorship and the importance of writing for audience, helping them to realize the realities of writing in different settings. Using zines in a public school setting would involve considerations that are not necessarily germane at the post-secondary level. I think it's important to recognize administrative and censorial issues as obstacles to bringing zines to school. Not for everyone, zines can offend and are hardly a panacea for complacency in education It would be naive to suggest that zines should be adopted without thinking through some of the very complex political and editorial issues they raise. Yet they offer some intriguing possibilities for both secondary and post-secondary classrooms. I'll conclude with three reasons, among many, why I believe zines offer opportunities to engage resistant students as well as those students Trimbur mentioned who could benefit from learning how to resist.

First, zines provide a site for resistance because they offer students a way to contextualize literacy itself as a social and political construct. As J. Elspeth Stuckey reminds us in *The Violence of Literacy*, literacy "can be understood only it its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be

seen as one of intrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it" (vii). Zines are to literature what off-off-off Broadway is to theater in New York, avant garde and about as non-canonical as you can get. They invite strong responses to both words and graphics, and because they are often controversial, zines provide a way to raise raise social consciousness and ask questions which require students to think critically about power relationships between dominant and sub-cultural groups for example.

Next, students can discover a world of publishing possibilities through zines. While most do not gain access to mainstream academic and popular publications, almost anyone can find a place to publish through zines. If no place seems available, it's easy enough to become a publisher. Students can collaborate and work cooperatively on zine projects both in- and outside of the classroom.

Third, zines provide a wide open door through which students can enter the field of cultural studies. Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg discuss the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies, saying that cultural studies are both "actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary" (2). Cultural studies, they tell us, is "ambiguous from the beginning" and "best seen as a bricolage" (2). This is the case with zines where blurred boundaries abound.

In conclusion, I'd encourage the timid and the bold to take a look at zines, to see what these fragmented, often visually and verbally shocking texts have to offer to students who are bored and resistant to "classroom" writing. In almost any form, zines can help a teacher decenter their classroom and make spaces for students to encounter the other and to experience their own voices.

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